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LIVE-FIRE TRAINING GIVES V CORPS ENGINEERS SKILLS TO SURVIVE CONVOY OPERATIONS IN IRAQ

By Dennis Johnson

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GRAFENWOEHR TRAINING AREA, Germany – The weather was more reminiscent of Afghanistan than Iraq when Soldiers of V Corps' 130th Engineer Brigade completed a convoy live-fire exercise here March 5-6.

To give their Soldiers the experience of firing from a convoy, the brigade's Headquarters and Headquarters Company, about 70 Soldiers, traveled over the frozen fields here to practice with live ammunition.

The exercise took place as the the

brigade took part in the corps' Victory Focus exercise, allowing the engineers to check off one more item on a long list of tasks that are required to be fully retrained and ready to deploy again.



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Master Sgt. Timothy DeMaria, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 130th Engineer Brigade, fires his 9mm pistol during the company's convoy live-fire training at the Grafenwoehr (Germany) Training Area March 5 and 6.

The convoy live-fire training lane here is a requirement for all units returning to Iraq and gives Soldiers an opportunity to fire live rounds from a convoy, preparing them for one of the most common, and dangerous, duties in Iraq -- convoy operations.

To go through the training lane, the Soldiers first formed a convoy of about five Humvees and heavy trucks. The convoy then stopped at the ammunition depot at the entrance to the range, where each Soldier received live ammunition and mounted his vehicle. As they prepared to mount up, the troops assured their weapons were set to "safe." "Muzzle awareness" and overall weapons safety was top priority throughout the exercise.

Some Soldiers fired the standard infantry weapon, the M16A2 rifle, while others fired the M249 Squad Automatic Weapons or 9mm pistol. For some, this was the first time they fired their weapons from moving vehicles.

On their first trip through the convoy lane the Soldiers carried just a few live rounds -- only five for each M16. On the second go-around, each carried a full magazine. Their third trip through the convoy lane was completed that night, in the dark and under even colder temperatures.

As the convoy wound its way onto the range, approaching in the target area, the order was passed from truck to truck for the Soldiers "lock and load" their weapons, to prepare to fire. As green plastic targets, shaped as enemy combatants and vehicles, popped up from the snowy fields, the Soldiers cut them down with their fire. When they repeat the convoy at night, chemical lights are used to mark the targets.

"All Iraqi insurgents wear chem' lites," joked one Soldier.

About halfway through the lane, the convoy stopped to stage a mock "maintenance halt."

While some Soldiers took up a defensive perimeter, others simulated performing maintenance on their vehicles.

The Soldiers fired their weapons from ground positions during the halt and then mounted up and rolled on.

At the end of the lane, when all the ammunition was expended, the Soldiers climbed down from their trucks and stood in a long line down one side of the convoy to clear their weapons under the watchful eye of range NCOs and officers.

The convoy exercise was observed and evaluated by the training area staff from a tower at the edge of the range. For HHC's trip through the lane, Capt. Therese Kelley, the rear detachment commander for the brigade's 94th Engineer Battalion, was enlisted to help. "We're unit evaluators, watching how they lead their convoy," said Kelley.

Kelley was the unit movement officer and battle captain for the 94th as they deployed to Kuwait and then Iraq in January, but she was recently recalled to lead the rear detachment.

Presently, the 94th Engineer Battalion is based at Camp Marez in Mosul, Iraq where they are performing a variety of construction jobs, many for base security. The battalion has also assisted in many Iraqi reconstruction projects in downtown Mosul.

As convoys have become such a prominent target for insurgents in Iraq, the Army's training has adapted to the situation. Most of the training lanes at Grafenwoehr have a convoy aspect to them. In addition to the convoy live-fire lane, there's a training lane where convoys come under attack from opposition forces and a night convoy training lane that gives drivers experience driving with night vision goggles.

Riding in the back of the trucks, with the daytime temperatures hovering around -5 C, Soldiers tried to keep their hands warm while waiting for their chance to knock down some targets. A few deer grazed along the edge of a thin wood, oblivious to the convoy of firepower rolling by.

After the convoy, the Soldiers gathered in the mess hall for an after-action report.

Everyone was encouraged to speak up and offer any criticism or advice on how the exercise went.

"I think everyone did a good job keeping safety in mind," said Capt. Michele Riniker, the 130th's brigade maintenance officer.

"There were a few problems with communications, but you made it work with hand signals.

I could tell you were communicating,” said Kelley. “Overall I think you all did a great job.”

**TO VIEW A PHOTO
GALLERY OF ADDITIONAL
IMAGES OF THE 130TH'S
LIVE-FIRE TRAINING,**

Before rolling out on the exercise it was discovered that there weren't enough radios for everyone, so the convoy leader, 130th

Engineer Brigade maintenance officer Lt. Amber Schleuning, did some quick thinking and came up with a few easy light and hand signals.

“It's Murphy's Law in action,” said Schleuning. “But we came up with some hand signals, made sure everyone was clear on them, and then executed. We'll do the same tonight, but just add the chemical lights.”

The 130th brought a few Soldiers from other units along for the ride. Spc. Michael

Easterbrook from the 330th Rear Operations Center in Kaiserslautern, Germany is headed for Afghanistan and joined the 130th to complete his training before deploying.

“I thought this unit did pretty good,” said Easterbrook. The NCOs on our truck had really good command and control. It's really important. On patrol, you need to have good control over your Soldiers. That shows good leaderships qualities.”

When asked about the cold weather, Easterbrook said, “Weather affects all you do, every aspect from weapons and vehicles to morale.”But the snow doesn't bother me. It's just another season.”

